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SUBJECT: TAJIK GOVERNMENT RETAINS STRONG CONTROL OVER ISLAMIC LEADERS

CLASSIFIED BY: TJACOBSON, AMBASSADOR, STATE, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Mufti Domulloh Khudoyberdi of Tajikistan's Council of Ulamo called PolOff to his office March 16 to retract his statements during a meeting with the Ambassador and visiting U.S. OSCE Ambassador Julie Finley March 7. The Mufti explained that he would like to convey additional information to the Embassy, but at the time he was unable to share openly and truthfully his opinions fearing his words would be relayed to the government. END SUMMARY.

COUNCIL OF ULAMO ISSUES STANDARDIZED SERMON

¶2. (C) As Tajikistan's head Mufti, Khudoyberdi expressed his grave concern about the limits on practicing Islam in Tajikistan, including the influence of the Council of Ulamo, which serves as an advisory body for Tajikistan's Islamic community. The Chairman of the Council of Ulamo, Amanullo Nematzoda, recently passed out a draft sermon to be distributed to imams across Tajikistan. The Council will instruct imams to preach from the sermon and not to deviate too far from its message. Khudoyberdi repeatedly expressed disappointment with Nematzoda whom he touted as a government stooge with no scholarly Islamic background. Khudoyberdi suspects the chairman did not draft the sermon himself, but rather the government ordered him to disseminate the draft sermon as the puppet leader of the religious Muslim community

MUFTI ADMITS FATWA WAS WRONG

¶3. (C) Khudoyberdi also criticized the Nematzoda for issuing the 2004 fatwa prohibiting women from praying in mosques, even in areas separated from men. In the March 7 meeting with Ambassadors Finley and Jacobson, Khudoyberdi explained that the reasoning behind the fatwa was because in Tajikistan, traditionally, women had never gone to the mosques to pray and the Koran does not say that women should pray in mosques. On March 16, the Mufti apologized for his stock answers that all imams relay. He explained that he actually would like to see more women attend mosque because they are the caretakers and teachers of Tajikistan's children and are influential in shaping the next generation's perspective. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan defied the fatwa and has established a mosque where women can also pray. Although Khudoyberdi is in favor of women praying in mosques, as long as the present Chairman remains in power, the Council of Ulamo is not in a position to defy the government, which pushed the Council to issue the fatwa.

SECULAR EDUCATION IN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

¶4. (C) The revamping of the curriculum in Islamic schools represents a new development in Tajikistan's Islamic community. According to media reports, a pilot project funded by the Swiss Cooperation Office will set up a new curriculum with secular courses that will better educate madrassah students and Islamic University graduates and empower them to be more competitive in the job market. (COMMENT: The new curriculum's influence remains to be seen. Although any increase in secular education is a benefit to Tajikistan, this could also serve as a way for the government to dilute religious education. In turn, a weak system of religious education could drive young people to seek religion elsewhere. END COMMENT.) Khudoyberdi was disappointed at the state of religious education in Tajikistan and admitted that the Islamic University churns out unqualified students. He pointed out that like other higher education institutions, the standards are low and teachers untrained.

A NON-INDEPENDENT MOSQUE

¶5. (C) Khudoyberdi began the meeting by advising PolOff never to schedule a meeting with more than one Tajik interlocutor at a time. Khudoyberdi explained that if there is more than one Tajik in the room, one of them may be a National Committee for State Security agent. Even if no one in the room is truly from the National Committee for State Security, participants will still refrain from speaking out against the power structure in fear that their words would leak out. Khudoyberdi revealed that every Friday the National Committee for State Security (formerly the Ministry of Security and still referred to as the Soviet name "KGB") would send an official to survey the worshippers at Dushanbe's Central Mosque and report suspicious activity.

¶6. (C) Khudoyberdi admitted that he no longer worries about government retribution. If the government dismisses him from his position as Tajikistan's Mufti and revokes his pension, he

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is confident that the community will take care of him financially. As a younger man, he would not have dared to speak out against the government, but he has nothing to lose in his old age and as a devout religious leader, mourns the deterioration of Islam in Tajikistan.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Khudoyberdi's revealing comments confirm the government's continuing watchful eye on Islamic activities in Tajikistan. Police still round up children found in mosques when they should be in school. Officials shut down unregistered mosques. Although the government's activities are based on attempts to curb extremism, its heavy-handedness and strict control of Islamic activity not only infringes on freedom of religion, but may also further drive people towards non-traditional, and more extreme, Islamic groups. The government fears Islamic radicalism, and little hope exists that it will loosen its surveillance or control on Tajikistan's practicing Muslims. END COMMENT.

HUSHEK